The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies

de L'Institut Canadien D'Études Stratégiques

THE MILITARY-MEDIA DYNAMIC: CHALLENGES FOR CANADA

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Strategic Datalink #107
September 2002

In June 2002, the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies held a seminar entitled, *Vision Into Reality: Towards a New Canadian Defence and Security Concept*. During the proceedings a comment was made by an official from the Dutch Embassy that prompted vigorous debate among those in attendance. It was argued that many European countries, such as the Netherlands, with half the population of, and almost an equivalent defence budget as Canada, have a much better understanding of handling the media than Canada does. It was also suggested that this is a key factor in the lack of widespread public and government support for the Canadian Forces (CF).

The 'CNN Effect'

In an era where commentators such as MGen (Retd) Lewis Mackenzie believe that "the media had more impact on keeping the peace and reducing atrocities than the peacekeeping personnel", understanding the military-media dynamic, or the so-called 'CNN effect', is of the utmost importance for any informed discussion on the future of the Canadian military.[1] The CF's failure to modernize its understanding of the military-media dynamic was made painfully clear during the recent conflict in Afghanistan when National Defence Headquarters most notable public relations triumph was to defer questions regarding operational successes to Pentagon officials who knew how to handle the media. More recently, the CF all but squandered a golden opportunity to turn a member of the Canadian battle group's sniper section - who, along with several of his colleagues, is awaiting decoration by the United States - into a public relations triumph. Instead, he faces charges of misconduct stemming from an alledged altercation with a superior.

Welcoming the Canadian Forces into the media-saturated world of the 21st century requires an understanding of the CNN effect. While far from an absolute definition, Stephen Badsey suggests that the CNN effect is a massive, media-induced public reaction that radically alters highly complex military operations and simultaneously prevents effective intervention by placing arbitrary constraints on the level of force used and on the willingness to risk casualties.[2] The *International Herald Tribune* first coined the term in 1992, observing that the CNN effect is a Apublic demand for military intervention, followed by public protest when casualties are suffered.[3] The immediacy and global reach of media has given it an unprecedented potential to shape national and international opinion towards conflict situations in which Canada and its allies may become embroiled. The danger of the CNN effect is that media influence can result in inappropriate, ineffective or dangerous foreign and defence policy decisions that downplays the importance of long-term national security interests in favour of emotionally-driven, politically opportunistic responses.[4] This effect has made winning the 'media war' at home one of the most important strategic variables for policy makers and makes a new understanding of the CNN effect of the utmost importance for Canada's defence and security policy in the 21st century.

Evolution of the Dynamic

During the Second World War and the Korean War, media acces to the battlefield, and the information gleaned from friendly forces, was tightly controlled through the use of press pools and military censors. These measures had a profound influence on the quantity and content of information conveyed to the public. It was during the Vietnam War that the military-media dynamic began to change into its current incarnation. Civilian journalists were

free to roam the countryside and talk freely with the average soldier. In the face of mounting losses and diminishing gains, public support for the war crumbled and the United States withdrew from Vietnam to the bitter resentment of the US military. This led to the development of a broadly accepted view that unfavourable media coverage 'lost' the war. Contemporary scholarship has largely discredited this view, arguing that it was the disillusionment of the American intellectual élite, and not the general public, that led to US disengagement from Vietnam.[5]

Although such views are still a matter for heated debate, the Vietnam 'myth' has become the bedrock of 30 years of post-Vietnam military tactics, philosophy and technology.[6] The goals of military strategy were expanded so that winning the media war became a critical element in any conflict.[7] These changes were as much poltical as military, and had a significant influence on the British, Canadian, Australian and other allied military strategies.[8] Accurate or not, the Vietnam myth is a key element in any modern study of the CNN effect in the Canadian context.

The Falkland Islands Crisis of 1982 represented the first major evolution in the military-media dynamic.[9] That it involved Britain rather than the US demonstrates the trickle-down impact of Vietnam throughout the entire Western defence establishment. The use of disinformation, indirect censorship, and restricted media access to the conflict maximized the British military's ability to control the content and flow of information. Western publics heard little from Argentina, the resulting vacuum being filled with statements favourable to the UK armed forces, official (ie. censored) footage, and political rhetoric.[10] This model was further developed in the 1980s during the American interventions in Grenada and Panama.

The Gulf War of 1990-1991 became the textbook example of winning the media war where one of the keys to victory was massive public support.[11] Throughout the conflict, the Bush Administration enjoyed upwards of 89% public approval for its handling of the crisis. US media coverage reflected this patriotic tendency, becoming, in the eyes of some, little more than a vehicle for propaganda.[12] American officials managed the media to such an extent (ie. through press pools) that they enjoyed a monopoly on information relating to the military such that the media had virtually no ability to influence or alter it in any way.[13] The Administration justified these measures on the grounds of national and operational security, the safety of the media, and the belief that A soldiers right to survive transcends the public's need to know.[14] This led to assertions that the Gulf War, despite constant media coverage, was perhaps the most under-reported and politically stage-managed conflict in history.[15]

The Pentagon's objectives were to control media knowledge of and access to the conflict, and to suppress objective, critical analysis that might undermine public support.[16] It filled the resulting media vacuum with official pro-military coverage, sanitized press briefings, and the high-tech footage of the apparent efficacy of 'smart' bombs.[17] Since limited access was better than no access, the media was often forced to focus on harmless human interest stories such as families separated by war, unit mascots, and the ethnic composition of the coalition forces.[18] Some journalists did attempt to provide independent voices and criticism of policy but were forced to put themselves in personal danger, endure harsh attacks on their credibility, or worse.[19] The Gulf War left policy-makers in a commanding position over the media and had wedged the media war firmly into the policy-making process.[20]

During the 1990s a new phase in the evolution of military-media relations came into being. It was characterized by the interplay between the CNN effect and the limited conflicts taking place around the world. Media images of human tragedy in Somalia led to public demands that policy-makers 'do something'. Soon after, images of tragedy were replaced with those of food distribution and military intervention.[21] This put the accepted military model of media war at odds with the demands of peacekeeping operations that are often characterized by unclear mandates, a cloudier distinction between ally and adversary, the active involvement of non-state actors (ie. aid organizations) in the crisis area, and open-ended military commitments by contributing states.[22] Casualties and the seemingly intractable nature of the conflicts limited the success of the Gulf War model of military-media relations and opened the door for criticism and loss of public support. In Somalia, it is often alleged that the US decision to withdraw from Operation Restore Hope was based on the footage on CNN of a dead American being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu.[23] Canada and the CF have also been accused of failing to understand the military-media dynamic. In Somalia, officers attempted to stifle access to information relating to the shooting death of two Somalis alleged to have broken into the Canadian camp on a mission of theft.

In the post-September 11th world, the imperatives of national survival are predominant, as the US 'war' against terrorism adopts the Gulf War media model with no indications of any change of strategy. As conflict with Iraq looms, this could have serious implications for the American public's desire not only to remain informed on what their govenment is contemplating, but to influence policy.

The Dynamic in Practice

So what then does this military-media relationship mean for future Canadian

policy? The first question that needs to be answered is whether the CNN effect means that the media has the ability to influence Canadian foreign and defence policy. A simple answer is no, since the media is, for the most part, intellectually and structurally incapable of offering independent, critical analysis of the complexities of international law, geopolitics, and military strategy.[24] If the media is incapable of influencing military policy makers directly, or even framing a clear public debate, then how can it influence policy? It does so in two ways: by affecting the policy-making process and by being the conduit through which public support (or lack thereof) is transmitted.

The CNN effect influences the process of how policy is made rather than the resulting policy itself. Even when the media permits interest groups and lobbyists to draw attention to specific causes, it does little more than force policy-makers to react with whatever they feel is appropriate.[25] In a sense, it is the speed and prevalence of modern media that gives the CNN effect a larger influence on the policy making process.[26] It forces policy-makers, who may not even engage with the media themselves, to quickly address media concerns not because they are necessarily legitimate, but because of the fact that they have been reported and may affect public opinion or the government's policy agenda.

Public support is a crucial element in understanding the CNN effect. It is essential for any policy - especially military operations - to have a solid base of public support that can be gained through the media. It has been shown, however, that fear of anticipated public retribution for a failure to act has much more of an impact on policy than public support at the time.[28]

In one model of understanding, public support becomes merely an extension of élite views, and the impact of a particular media outlet depends upon its ability to exert political pressure on élites.[29] The key to this relationship is gaining a unified, élite consensus on policy that prevents the media from gaining a critical foothold.[30] In the case of strong national policy and élite consensus, the public will tend to rally behind élite opinion and will have little capacity for independent analysis of either the crisis or the political remedies being proposed. Canada is thus left to rely on US threat perceptions of, say, Saddam Hussein or Al-Qaeda. This also leads to a situation in which the media-military dynamic is a forum for communication and debate between national and international élites (a phenomenon sometimes referred to as 'virtual diplomacy') that has increasingly become faster and more important than traditional, and perhaps outdated, diplomatic channels.[31]

If political hesitancy or confusion is present, the media will transmit this to the public. It may package its coverage with policy alternatives proposed by other governments. This is especially important in the Canadian context since without strong leadership and responsive, proactive public relations on the part of the Government of Canada and the Department of National Defence, American élite influence will tend to sway the Canadian media, resulting in a deeper impact on Canadian élite views.[32] The CNN effect then becomes a function of successful media war and the relative weight of élite interests. The prize in this theatre is strong public support for policy decisions, which in turn buttresses national will.

Conclusion

An omnipresent, technologically-advanced global media emerged through Vietnam, the Gulf War, and other conflicts in the 1990s. But it was outpaced by developments in media war tactics in the US, Britain, and elsewhere, although to a lesser degree in Canada. The CNN effect functions as part of the broader military-media dynamic dependent on public support, élite interests, and effective media war tactics. While the media serves primarily as a forum for debate, its influence is felt primarily during the policy formulation process.

Canada must learn from the experiences of its allies throughout the 20th century and apply a coherent media war strategy that will yield substantially greater public and élite support for Canadian policy. If the Department of National Defence and the CF can master the military-media dynamic, showing the nation's military successes and heroes for what they are, it is possible that funding deficiencies, personnel problems, and a dearth of public support will become yesterday's news.

Notes

1. Major-General Lewis Mackenzie in Ian Stewart and Susan L. Carruthers (eds.), *War, Culture and the Media: Representations of the Military in 20th Century Britain*, (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1996), p. 18 and Peter R. Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military: From Crimea to Desert Strike*, (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 272.

2. Badsey in Stewart, p. 5 and Badsey, p. 245.

3. Badsey in Stewart, p. 5. In fact, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former Secretary General of the United Nations once referred to CNN as "the sixteenth member of the (UN) Security Council." See Boutros Boutros-Ghali in Badsey, p. xviii and also Taylor in Badsey, p. 198.

4. Lance W. Bennett and David L. Paletz, *Taken by Storm: the Media, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 14, Badsey in Stewart, p. 16, Gowing in Badsey, p. 219, and Taylor, p. 177.

5. Young and Jesser, p. 276 and Badsey, p. 243-247.

6. Badsey, p. 246, Young and Jesser, p. 276 and Taylor, p. 178.

7. See US General Thomas Kelly in Bennett, p. 17-18 and see also Badsey, p. 240, Badsey in Stewart, p. 17, and Young and Jesser, p. 276..

8. Young and Jesser, p. 279.

9. See Badsey, p. xxix and Clem Lloyd, "The Case for the Media," in Peter R. Young, *Defence and the Media in a Time of Limited War*, (London: Frank Cass, 1992), p. 50.

10. See Young and Jesser, p. 277.

11. Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 237.

12. Media coverage presented the conflict in very black and white terms which Ed Siegel of the Boston Globe described as "stories of the forces of good versus the forces of darkness" in Bennett, p. 4-5. See also McAlister, p. 240 and William V. Kennedy, *The Military and the Media: Why the Press Cannot be Trusted to Cover a War*, (Westport: Praeger, 1993), p. 23.

13. Bennett, p. 37 and Kennedy, p. 145.

14. Richard Connaughton in Badsey, p. 241. See also Kennedy, p. 153-154.

15. Young and Jesser, p. 281. Of the 1500 journalists swarming around Saudi Arabia, a contingent triple the size of the number of reporters at D-Day in 1944 and more than the contribution of most coalition states, only a small pool of 200 were permitted limited access. See Taylor, p. 183-184.

16. Kalb in Bennett, p. 4, McAlister, p. 241 and Young and Jesser, p. 280.

17. US Smart Weaponry consisted of less than 8% of the bombs dropped on Iraq. See McAlister, p. 240, Young and Jesser, p. 280, Taylor, p. 192-195 and Lloyd, p. 45.

18. McAlister, p. 250-251 and Taylor, p. 189.

19. The case of CNN reporter Peter Arnett in Baghdad who was accused of treason is an excellent example. Another is a British TV crew that tried to send independent information back to London, only to have their transmission intercepted by an AWACS electronic warfare plane and be promptly arrested. See Kennedy, p. 23-25, Lloyd, p. 53, Taylor, p. 188, and Young and Jesser, p. 281.

20. Bennett, p. 38, Kennedy, p. 157, Lloyd, p. 44 and Patrick O'Heffernan, "A mutual exploitation model of media influence in US policy," in Bennett, p. 239.

21. Cohen in Bennett, p. 10 and Taylor, p. 178-179.

22. Young and Jesser, p. 281.

23. See Badsey in Stewart, p. 11, 164, Taylor, p. 181, and Young and Jesser, , 282.

24. O'Heffernan, p. 231-240 and Taylor, p. 191.

25. NGO's, for example, draw attention to looming conflicts attempting to gain financial and material support for their causes. See Badsey in Stewart, p. 14, Cohen in Bennett, p. 10, Gowing, p. 209, and Stig A. Nohrstedt and Rune Ottosen (eds). *Journalism and the New World Order: Gulf War, National News Discourses and Globalization* (Goteborg: Nordicom, 2000), p. 253.

26. This differs from the traditional view of media influence in "quiet conversations and reasoned editorials in elite newspapers". See Taylor, p. 199 and O'Heffernan in Bennett, p. 231.

27. Taylor, p. 198.

28. During the Gulf War, the US was concerned about the repercussions on American strategic interests and how the public would view future events rather than public pressure at the onset of the conflict which was virtual non-existent. See John Zaller, "Strategic politicians, public opinion, and the Gulf Crisis" in Bennett, p. 253-256. See also Badsey, p. 242, Gowing, p. 203 and Young and Jesser, p. 273.

29. By extension, this implies that an elite model places a greater emphasis on 'elite' newspapers and specialist correspondents and editors who have a greater ability to set the policy agenda. Badsey, p. 242-247 and Zaller, p. 250.

30. Badsey, p. 247, Nohrstedt, p. 249 and O'Heffernan, p. 241-243.

31. Nohrstedt, p. 244-248, O'Heffernan, p. 238 and Taylor, p. 197-198.

32. Nohrstedt, p. 250.

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